

Borderline *Sweet Dreams and Quiet Desires*. (Real Gone Music)

by Peter Stone Brown

Sometimes good albums and good musicians simply don't get the attention they deserve. Such is the case with Borderline, a group from Woodstock, New York who released *Sweet Dreams and Quiet Desires* on a tiny subsidiary of United Artists called Avalanche in 1973. Though the album received laudatory reviews in *Rolling Stone* and other music publications, the album never really broke through in terms of either airplay or sales. Borderline recorded a second album that never was released in the US due to a management change at United Artists, though it was eventually issued in Japan. Real Gone Music has just reissued both albums on a single disc. Interestingly enough in the context of today's music scene, the album shows that Borderline were forerunners of what is now termed Americana.

Borderline was comprised of two brothers who sang and wrote songs, David and Jon Gershen along with guitarist/singer, Jim Rooney. Rooney was a bluegrass influenced singer, who a decade before had recorded an album with the great banjo player Bill Keith for Prestige Records. He later went on to be an award winning record producer for such artists as Nanci Griffith and John Prine among others.

Woodstock, New York of course is best known because Bob Dylan lived there, though it was a colony for all types of artists, not just musical before and after Dylan. A wide variety of musicians resided there, and for a few years, you could go out on pretty much any night to one of the few local bars and more than likely catch somebody playing who was more than good. While a wide variety of musicians lived in Woodstock, quite a few played roots-oriented music. Some were refugees of the New York City folk scene. For a few years there was a distinctive sound emerging from Woodstock musicians that the record industry simply never caught onto in a major way.

John and David Gershen moved to Woodstock in the spring of 1969 as members of a band called The Montgomeries, who came close to but never landed a recording deal. One of the biggest fans of The Montgomeries was Van Morrison who would jam with them often. All of the key members of the group would eventually appear on records. As an example of how a group who never released a record can have staying power, 20 years after The Montgomeries disbanded, I came across an ad in a Bob Dylan Fanzine, *Look Back* that read: Does anyone know have recordings of a group called The Montgomeries that did "Down In The Flood" and "Tiny Montgomery."

The quality of Borderline's music can be determined by the musicians they attracted to play with them, steel guitarist and dobro player Ben Keith, (probably best known for his work with Neil Young); fiddlers Vassar Clements and Ken Kosek, The Brecker Brothers on horns; bassists, Jim Colegrove and Will Lee, drummers, Billy Mundi and Chris Parker, guitarist Amos Garrett, and a piano player named Richard Manuel and an organ player named Garth Hudson, as well as Band producer John Simon on piano.

The challenge of *Sweet Dreams and Quiet Desires* was how to take two very different singers and songwriters, even though they'd been playing together for years and a folky bluegrass singer covering fairly well known bluegrass standards and turn it into a cohesive album. The answer was to start at the starting point. The album begins with what initially sounds like a casual cover of "Handsome Molly" sung by Rooney with the other instruments fading in at various points and building up until you realize wait a second, this isn't a casual cover at all, this is a pretty hot band here. The album then takes off into various original songs, most grounded in country, but exploring other musical territory and whenever it gets out there on the edgy side it returns to Rooney with a bluegrass song for grounding. The songs are also grouped by feel and theme, and in many ways it is the brilliant work of Ben Keith on dobro and pedal steel which he takes to celestial heights that links the music together.

Of the original songs, David Gershen's songs are more straight ahead, rooted in folk and country with occasional touches of blues. As he says in the liner notes of the reissue, "Sweet melodies and wistful lyrics were what I was about." And while that statement is a fairly accurate self-assessment, I must point out that he was in no way a wimpy singer. He was a singer with a natural instinct for phrasing and how to present a song, and that instinct always added an extra layer of depth to whatever song he was singing. What I'm talking about will become very clear when listening to such songs as "The Distance," "Sweet Dreams and Quiet Desires," and "Don't Know Where I'm Going," a song that deserved to be a classic.

Jon Gershen's songs were clearly the most adventurous both musically and lyrically, and also terms of arrangement, which is something I realized listening to the reissue, but didn't necessarily notice when I first heard this album when it came out. His first song on the album is country, sort of reminiscent of Neil Young, starting off with a vocal that almost sounds fragile. "Dragonfly" is intense from the beginning acoustic riff, and builds in impact as the song continues and changes musically, thanks to the combination of Keith's pedal steel, Garth Hudson's organ, Richard Manuel's piano and David Sanborn's alto

sax. There was always a mystery in the mountains surrounding Woodstock, and this song captures that mystery. Equally mysterious is the song that closed the original album, "Along As It's You And Me," which in one sense is the heaviest rocker, but also combines genres, mixing steel interludes with jazz flavored saxophone.

It's a shame the second album was not released until now. Some of the songs might've broken through to a bigger audience. The songs this time including Rooney's are all original and in terms of production, it has a leaner more cohesive feel, while the sound overall is more on purpose. Standing out are the opening track, David Gershen's "Sonny Boy," and Jon Gershen's, "No Uncertain Terms," which may be the highlight of the album.

Ultimately though, Borderline wasn't about highlights. They were about playing good songs with great musicianship and consummate taste. They were about the less is more approach of putting the song before any kind of flash and singing songs with substance, feel and soul.